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Debate Paper 2

Is American Culture a Sustainability Problem?

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Energy consumption has been increasing since humanity first learned to gather resources such as energy and raw materials from the environment for personal benefit. The industrial revolutions and exponential population growth have caused incredible increases in resource consumption to the point at which the earth can no longer be viewed as infinite. Now that the limits of the earth in supplying resources and absorbing waste are being reached, the question of whether or not American culture is a sustainability problem becomes an important debate. This forces us to consider the possible causes such as capitalism, consumerism, and the treadmills of production and consumption. Further, the potential consequences such as economic crisis associated with resource scarcity and more intense storms associated with global warming. The huge reach of this issue involves many stakeholders. For example, Americans that are living the culture in question hold a huge stake in this debate. Other countries and citizens of those countries, whether they benefit or are hurt by American culture, are also stakeholders. Further, energy companies depend on the huge energy consumption that is characteristic of American culture and therefore hold a stake in this debate whether they are based on fossil fuels or alternatives such as wind, solar, or nuclear. Additionally, people such as economists, politicians, activists, scientists, and engineers are important stakeholders. In order to determine whether American culture is a sustainability problem, American culture must be characterized and sustainability must be defined. In particular, sub-issues such as the risk, constantly increasing standard of living, and consumerism associated with American culture must be addressed. Further, it is important to consider forms of regulation and how science factors into this debate.

Naomi Klein, author and activist, argues that American culture is a sustainability problem in her TED Talk titled, "Addicted to Risk." She argues that American culture is unsustainable because it is based on taking risks without considering the consequences and compares it to how gambling inevitably leads to bankruptcy. An example that Klein uses is the risks that are taken to increase production without having a backup plan to deal with unfavorable consequences. For

example, Klein explains how BP used deep water drilling to increase oil production without a solid plan for what to do if a blowout occurs. The subsequent blowout and gushing of oil for months into the Gulf of Mexico proved how unprepared BP was to handle such an event. Klein uses this example to highlight a key contradiction in how science is viewed by society and how this contributes to risk. On one hand, Americans view science and engineering as infallible when referring to theories and technology that help to improve the standard of living in America. For example, the technology that allowed BP to drill in waters that were originally considered too deep was accepted without fear of failure because it helped to increase oil production. On the other hand, Americans view science and engineering as highly uncertain when referring to theories and technology that may hurt the standard of living in America. For example, Klein explains how climate change theory is viewed with such skepticism because it means that Americans would have to sacrifice their standard of living. Further, Klein describes another contradiction that Americans make in their view of nature. On one hand, American capitalism is setup such that the earth is assumed to be unlimited in the resources that it can supply. For example, Klein highlights the incredible amount of fossil fuel energy that is consumed. On the other hand, Americans have the idea that nature's power is finite and can be controlled. Klein argues that both of these assumptions are dangerous because resources will become scarce if they are assumed to be infinite and there will be unintended consequences if nature is assumed to be controllable. Klein provides the precautionary principle as the solution to what she describes as the greed, hubris, recklessness, and overconfidence of American culture. This conservative approach avoids risks by assuming the worst and playing it safe when there are unknowns. This idea shows that Klein's ideological framework is that of someone who always plays it safe. For example, she most likely does things like always wearing a seatbelt in a car and wearing sunscreen when she is out in the sun for an extended period of time.

Overall, Klein's argument is very well organized, clearly conveyed, and contains many examples to support her arguments. As a result, it is very difficult to find weaknesses in her arguments. However, she could have strengthened her argument that the precautionary principle should be used to address climate change because climate science seems uncertain. While her point is valid, she could have argued that even if one does not want to use the precautionary principle, almost all of the uncertainty that appears around climate change is introduced by the media and not the climate scientists themselves. Another point that Klein included briefly in her

argument was that women are less likely to be overconfident and therefore more likely to use the precautionary principle. While this could be a potential solution, Klein could have explained better how it ties in with the rest of her argument. This connection was relatively weak compared to the other connections made in her arguments.

Ronald Reagan, actor and former President of the United States, in his official announcement of candidacy for President, argues that American culture is not a sustainability problem. Reagan argues that Americans do not have to sacrifice a constantly increasing standard of living in order to become sustainable. Instead, more things should be done to increase production and solve specific problems such as making a smaller more efficient government and reducing taxes that increase the cost of a certain standard of living. Reagan argues that one of the ways American culture can be made sustainable is by making the government more efficient. The government is significantly larger and more powerful than it should be and tends to spend more money than it gathers from taxes. Reagan argues that taxes should be reduced because they increase the cost of living and therefore make it more difficult to maintain and increase the standard of living. Reagan then addresses the energy crisis by saying that the solution is to increase production instead of reducing consumption. In the short term, the solution is to increase domestic oil production and invest in nuclear energy. In the long term, the solution is to invest in renewable energy sources such as solar and wind. Altogether, Reagan argues that Americans need not sacrifice anything because a consistently increasing standard of living is sustainable given that the correct actions are taken such as streamlining the government and focusing on increasing energy production. This shows that Reagan's ideological framework is based on the ethic that everyone has rights that they deserve and that there should be no unnecessary obstacle separating a person from their rights. In this case, the right is to an improved standard of living.

While Reagan's argument is convincing because of its emotional appeals to the audience's desire for self-benefit, his argument is both (understandably) outdated and is lacking in supporting evidence. For example, he argued that the energy crisis can be solved simply by increasing domestic energy production, but does not provide evidence that proves this is possible. Further, he does not provide estimates of how much his solution would cost to implement. Another example in which Reagan does not support his statements is in his argument that it is possible to both reduce taxes and still maintain the benefits that Americans

currently have. Reagan could have significantly strengthened this argument if he had been more specific about which taxes would be reduced and by how much and more specific about which benefits would be maintained.

Suzanne Goldenberg, in her article, “US Cult of Greed is Now a Global Environmental Threat, Report Warns,” argues that American culture is a sustainability problem not only because it results in such high resource and energy consumption, but also because it is spreading around the world. Goldenberg extends Naomi Klein’s arguments in that she describes American culture as if it were a disease caused by businesses promoting their products and spreading consumerism uncontrollably around the globe. For example, Goldenberg states that consumerism is spreading to other large countries such as Brazil, India, and China. If the people in all of these countries consumed the same amount of resources as Americans, the earth would be unable to supply the necessary resources. Further, Goldenberg quotes Erik Assadourian’s argument that it is impossible to become completely sustainable and still have a culture that is centered around consumerism. Altogether, Goldenberg’s argument enhance this debate because she describes how American culture is not just unsustainable in itself, but also unsustainable in its tendency to spread around the globe.

In my opinion, American culture is unsustainable in its current form. For example, our extensive use of fossil fuel energy for applications such as electricity and transportation is clearly unsustainable. I also agree that Americans act as though the Earth’s resources are infinite despite of the fact that they are clearly finite. However, it is my opinion that American culture can be made sustainable without significantly lowering the standard of living. For example, it is possible to replace fossil fuel energy with alternative sustainable sources such as wind and solar. The relatively small increase in cost could be absorbed without significant impacts on the economy. Further, I strongly believe that the precautionary principle can be used to prevent many of the problems that are occurring such as unexpected consequences of chemicals and problem that could occur but the science is uncertain such as stronger hurricanes due to global warming. Further, I am optimistic in future happiness because people’s perspectives on their current situation changes as circumstances change. In other words, what may currently seem very bad could become an everyday thing that is accepted as normal. For example, while the standard of living of people in history was lower than our standard of living today, those people did not find life particularly bad because it was the commonly accepted way of living.

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